

# Enslaved Souls and Bodies in Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street

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## Abstract

Chika Unigwe is a standout voice among contemporary African authors in America. She is the author of four novels and numerous short stories and essays. She writes about love, loss as well as cultural and racial confusions which continue to trouble her.

On Black Sisters' Street is one of her novels that illustrates the suffering of four African women of being double colonized; the first, is mind colonization while the second is the soul and body colonization in the new world. The writer tries in this novel to shed the light on the fact that colonization's aftermath is still existed.

The four Nigerian women dreamt of getting a better life in Europe and hence they decided to migrate to fulfill their dreams. To their surprise, they encounter another kind of colonization and racism in Europe. Their dreams fed out and turns to a horrible nightmare when they were forced to be slaves working in jobs they did not choose.

The turning point in the characters' lives occurred when one of them was murdered when she decides to rebel and leave the work.

This research delves into the lingering specters of oppression that persists long after the formal abolition of imperial rule. It explores how systems of economic subjugation, racial hierarchies, and social marginalization continue to shackle individuals, not only physically but also psychologically.

The novel proves beyond the shadow of doubt that the dream of the west is but an illusion as seen through African eyes by telling the stories of the four women using a raw and vivid flashback storytelling. It makes so clear for the reader that in our new world which is supposed to be free of colonization, colonization is still as powerful as before and the look of superiority and inferiority is still ruling the world.

**Keywords:** colonialism, neocolonialism, mind slavery

## الأرواح والأجسام المستعبدة في رواية شارع الأخوات السود للكاتبة تشيكا أونيجوي

مشاعل فارس صالح

قسم اللغة الإنكليزية/ كلية الآداب/ جامعة الموصل

## المستخلص

تشيكا أونيجوي هي صوت بارز بين المؤلفين الأفارقة المعاصرين في أمريكا. وهي مؤلفة لأربع روايات والعديد من القصص القصيرة والمقالات. تكتب عن الحب والخسارة بالإضافة إلى الالتباسات الثقافية والعنصرية التي ما تزال تزعجها. في شارع الأخوات السود هي إحدى رواياتها التي توضح معاناة أربع نساء أفريقيات من تعرضهن للاستعمار المزدوج. الأول هو استعمار العقل والثاني هو استعمار الروح والجسد في العالم الجديد. تحاول الكاتبة في هذه الرواية تسليط الضوء على حقيقة أن آثار الاستعمار ما تزال موجودة.

حلمت النساء النيجيريات الأربع بالحصول على حياة أفضل في أوروبا ومن ثم قررن الهجرة لتحقيق أحلامهن. واجهت النساء المهاجرات نوعاً آخر من الاستعمار والعنصرية في أوروبا. وتلاشت أحلامهم وتحولت إلى كابوس مروّع عندما أُجبروا على أن يكونوا عبيداً يعملون في وظائف لم يختاروها.

حدثت نقطة التحول في حياة الشخصيات حين قُتل إحداهن عندما قررت التمرد وترك العمل. يتناول البحث الأطياف المتبقية من القمع التي تستمر حتى بعد إلغاء الحكم الاستعماري رسمياً. يستكشف البحث كيف تواصل أنظمة الاستعباد الاقتصادي والتسلسلات الهرمية العرقية والتمييز الاجتماعي تقييد الأفراد، ليس فقط جسدياً، بل ونفسياً أيضاً. تثبت الرواية بما لا يدع مجالاً للشك أن حلم الغرب ما هو إلا وهم كما يرى من عيون أفريقية عبر سرد قصص النساء الأربع باستخدام سرد قصصي خام وحيوي. ويوضح للقارئ أنه في عالمنا الجديد الذي من المفترض أن يكون خالياً من الاستعمار، وما يزال الاستعمار قويا كما كان من قبل، وما تزال نظرة التفوق والدونية تحكم العالم.

الكلمات الدالة: الاستعمار، الاستعمار الجديد، عبودية العقل.

## Introduction

The echoes of colonial chains did not vanish with the dawn of independence; they merely shifted from, embedding themselves into the fabric of postcolonial societies. The shackle of colonial rule may have been cast off in name, but their weight still lingers into the lives of those once bound by its grip. Though empires have crumbled and nations have reclaimed their sovereignty, the ghost of forced servitude, racial subjugation, and economic dependence continue to haunt the postcolonial world. The body, once branded as property, still bears the marks of exploitation in the form of poverty, labor inequities, and system discrimination. The soul, once severed from its roots by cultural erasure and forced assimilation, remains in search of wholeness, battling the inherited trauma of displacement and subjugation.

Colonialism is the domination of a powerful country on another. The goal of colonizing a country is political domination first, but the exploitation of that country is the essence. Post-colonialism is the impact of the colonizers and its continuing influence on colonized people (linguistic, political, economic, social and cultural impact). Africa has a long history of colonization. The effect of it upon countries and people is not a past. All African countries were under European colonialism at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Habib [1:272] thinks that critics of post colonialism have focused on reexamining the history of colonialism: economically, politically, and culturally; studying the impact of colonialism on colonizing powers and colonized people both.

After decades of depression and depreciation, the psyche of the colonized was hugely affected. Franz fanon and other scholars stated that " racism illustrates, summarizes, and symbolizes the colonial relation"[2:32]. In other words, although colonization is no longer physically present, the values, attitudes, and beliefs that were imposed on the indigenous people still hold sway, and as a result, the former colonized nations continue to face oppression but with new form[3:54]. Fanon[4:40] said, "Independence has certainly brought the colonized people's moral reparation and recognized their dignity. But they have not yet had time to elaborate a society or build and ascertain values". According to postcolonial theory, many former colonists are still affected by colonialism, particularly

cultural imperialism. One effect of colonialism is colonial mentality, which says that people who have been colonized have been conditioned to prioritize the ideals of the dominant (colonizer) culture over their own [5:88]. Such, internalized racial oppression and internalized racial inferiority are two examples of colonial mentality[5:105]. According to Speight, internalized racial oppression occurs when one undervalues their own values, beliefs, and behaviors while internalizing those of the hegemonic group. To put it another way, the dominant group has the power to define and name reality, determining what is 'normal,' real', and correct. As a result, the target group's culture, language, and history are ignored, discounted, misrepresented, or eradicated [6:130].

Habib admits that postcolonial Orientalism, by Edward Said, is a classic image of colonialism which captures the subjugation of the colonized nations [1:264]. Said focused on how the west could plant, in colonized people's mind, the idea of the superiority of the west and the inferiority of the east or the orient defining themselves (the western or European) as the superior race. The West, according to Said, convinced the colonized people that they can help in bringing a better civilization to the eastern; that to legalize imperialism [7:205].

Many years of subjugation had their prints on the colonized people, as Franz Fanon mentioned in his book The Wretch of the Earth, that how people were mentally disordered and confused after colonialism. They tried to hold themselves together but failed because the effect was terribly huge.

The characters of On Black Sisters' Street are not an exception. All of them suffered from that effect and one of them is that leaving the country and be in Europe is the solution of their economic problems and broken souls; not to forget the political instability.

Unemployment and corruption is a reason that make people of ex-colonies depart home to Europe or America. Genocide is another important reason to immigrate. African try to escape from such living conditions searching for better life out of their tremendous desperation.

Concerning Africa, the Occident was considered as the promise land or it was fictionalized to be so. Leaving home behind and migrate to the land of dreams, as they imagined, is an attempt to forget and start new life with new identity. That dream of paradise vanishes away for many when they travel, legally or illegally, to the West discovering that it is a nightmare and they are disillusioned in that seemingly paradise considering the harsh life even there, or worse.

Many Writers were not speechless and tried to give voice to people in the previous colonies through their characters beside Chika Unigwe as Sefi Atta, Chimamamand Adichie and Chris Abani to mention some. They wanted to denounce that the bad effect of colonialism is still there and not past. It is prevail in ex-colonized African countries.

In On Black Sisters' Street, the reader can identify this perception of the West as the dream land. The four women characters in the novel: Efe, Ama, Joyce and Sisi view the West as Eden and a wonderful place to live in that they need a miracle to be there:

"Ama told the walls she wanted to be abroad [...] No one she knew had been abroad but every night when she prayed, she asked God for a miracle [8:134-135].

Ama was only eight years old when she was dreaming to leave her own country and home. They think that the only way to good life is to leave their countries. The novel reveals this idea and tackles the four characters as a model.

The other women in the novel are also dreamers and their perception of the west is shaped from childhood to be a paradise like. Sisi has a university degree, yet she prefers that she had nursing degree because she thinks that the men who return home from America and Europe have a lot of money:" At Christmas most of the men returning from Europe or America with wallets full of foreign currency, to scout for wives, went for the nurses. They said it was easier for nurses to get a job abroad." [8:29]

Those returnees also participated in that delusion by conveying the good side only. They are influenced by the west and become as instruments in the hands of imperialism to perpetuate mental colonialization and the aim is to convince the Africans accept their inferiority comparing to westerners.

So, Efe is asked if she wants to go abroad; she considered the question odd: " If I wan' go abroad, oga Dele?Any body dey ask pikin de pikin want sweet? Who did not want to go abroad?" [8:81-82].

The question was absurd for her. It was her ambition. It was just inherited, African has the desire to travel abroad since they were born.

Characters of the novel were just like many people in Africa reflect the mental and then new body new colonization. The tradition started with body then mind, the new is quite smarter and mor effective.

### The novelist's Biography

Chika Unigwe, the sixth of seven children, was born in Enugu, Nigeria, on June 12, 1974. She attended Federal Government Girls' College in Abuja for her high school education before graduating from the University of Nigeria in Nsukka in 1995 with a bachelor's degree in English.

In the same year that she married a Belgian engineer, Chika moved to Turnhout in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. The couple has four children together. In 1996, she received her Master of Arts in English from the Catholic University of Leuven (KUL). Her doctoral dissertation, "In the Shadow of Ala: Igbo Women Writing as an Act of Righting," was awarded in 2004 by the University of Leiden in the Netherlands.

Chika lived in Belgium until 2013, with the exception of two years in Seattle from 2000 to 2002. In addition to pursuing her writing career, she also taught Flemish to immigrants and served on the Turnhout town council during that time. She relocated to the Atlanta region of the United States in 2013.

Chika served as a juror for the 2016 Man Booker International Prize and is the Creative Director of the Awele Creative Trust. She taught creative writing at Emory University in Georgia after serving as the Bonderman Professor of Creative Writing at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, USA, from 2016 to 2017. She became a core faculty member in the MFA in Creative Writing program at Georgia College and State University in 2020–2021.

Over the years, Chika has received several accolades and distinctions. Among them is the short story "The Secret," which was nominated for the 2004 Caine Prize for African writing. Borrowed Smile won the 2003 BBC Short Story Competition.

Her novel, On Black Sisters' Street, won the 2012 NLNG Prize for Literature. Additionally, she has received numerous fellowships, such as the following: 2007 Unesco-Aschberg Creative Writing Fellowship.

2009 Fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation (Bellagio Center, Italy) .

2011 HALD Fellowship (Denmark's HALD Center).

2011 and 2016 Writing Fellowship at the Ledig House (Omi NY, USA) 2013 Writing Fellowship at Cove Park (Scotland) 2014 Writer-in-Residence, Haverford College (Philadelphia PA, USA) 2014 Sylt Fellowship for African Writers.

### **On Black Sisters' Street**

In *On Black Sisters Street*, four African women—Joyce, Ama, Efe, and Sisi—are taken to Antwerp by sex trafficker Dele for a hefty thirty thousand euros apiece, and forced to work as prostitutes in order to pay him five hundred euros a month.

They share an apartment in the city's red-light district, but in order to protect their vulnerable positions, their pasts are largely unknown to one another—that is, until Sisi is unexplainably killed.

Scenes of the women's lives in Antwerp (primarily at their apartment on Zwarte Zusterstraat) after learning of Sisi's murder alternate with flashbacks to their past lives, which make up the book's structure. The first flashback introduces us to Sisi, who was once known as Chisom, and tells us about her upbringing in a middle-class Lagos neighborhood. Of the four ladies, she is the only one without a glaringly obvious history of trauma. She had aspirations of moving away from home and achieving upward mobility as a child. She attended college and earned a degree in business administration and finance, but she was still unemployed after applying for jobs for years. As we cut to the other three women at home, we continue to speculate about what could have happened to the fourth.

Three years into her relationship with Peter, Chisom is followed in the following flashback. As the movie comes to a close, we find out that she intends to leave him despite his promise to take her to Europe. She meets Dele, the hustler who will eventually become her pimp, in the following scene while she is still in Lagos. We jump ahead to Antwerp one more. Their landlady, Madam, has informed Ama, Efe, and Joyce that Sisi's body has been located. Despite their tension, they start to regard one another as family. Chisom intends to leave Lagos and work for Dele in the upcoming flashback. She aspires to be wealthy, but Peter is devastated to lose her. We watch her fly out in silence after taking a taxi to the airport.

The backstory of Efe is presented in the following chapter. At sixteen, she becomes pregnant for the first time in her life with an older guy, Titus. He purchases her clothing and is rich from running a hair weaving business. When she tells Titus she is pregnant, he gets dressed right away and leaves the motel room where they continue their affair. He stays away from Efe after that. After giving birth, she calls her son Lucky Ikponwosa, or



L.I. Titus rejects his illegitimate son despite having a wife and kids. Efe meets Dele at that point, and he tells her about his opportunity. She makes the decision to travel to Europe with her family after leaving L.I.

Returning to the present, the three women continue to think about the catastrophe that has befallen their home while also processing Efe's account. Between their times of camaraderie, tensions still exist. Ama argues for her decision and the advantages their position offers them. The next story we will hear is hers.

Ama comes from a deeply devout family. Her father (not biologically) is a well-liked Nigerian pastor of one of the city's biggest churches, and everyone calls him Brother Cyril. Brother Cyril starts raping Ama the night after her eighth birthday. She would recite what he did to her bedroom's walls because she couldn't tell anyone. Later in her childhood, Ama confronts her parents about Brother Cyril's behavior after they argue over the unsatisfactory test results she shared online. Brother Cyril vehemently disputes her statements and condemns her lack of gratitude. Even if she might not believe her, Ama's mother won't put her house at risk because of her accusation.

Brother Cyril discloses that he is not her real father but, out of altruism, took in her expectant mother. Ama stays up with Mama Eko, her mother's cousin, in Lagos after he evicts her from the house. She runs into Mama Eko's client Dele there. She accepts Dele's proposal in an effort to show her family that she is independent of them. We have followed Sisi throughout in short, sporadic segments as she ended up in Antwerp, met Madam and Efe and her new life, filed for asylum using a false narrative, and denying her past.

She frequently strolls through Antwerp's streets; these are the primary episodes where we get to view the city, where she enjoys shopping. Even though she doesn't like her job, she goes to a bar where she can get clients.

The following tale is that of Joyce, or Alek as she was known prior to Zwarte Zusterstraat. She's from Sudan. They try to escape since they are caught between militias in a civil war, but troops kill her brother and parents and rape her. She is sent to a refugee camp, where she settles down and develops feelings for Polycarp, a Nigerian soldier. She is one victim of the genocides that happened in her country where colonialism played a major part in it through policies that fostered ethnic divisions. Alek joins Polycarp when he is posted to Lagos. They share a city residence. He begins making brief visits to his relatives in Onitsha, but he never brings Alek. He returns to Lagos with his mother the second time.

Alek is told by Polycarp during that visit that he must wed an Igbo woman or his parents will never be able to forgive him. She is devastated, and he is remorseful. She accepts Dele's offer to perform sex work in Europe after he sets up a meeting with the three of them. He knows Dele. She is given a new name by Dele. Her trip is planned. Joyce remembers how well she and Sisi got along when she first arrived.

Sisi's life gets worse and worse. She feels bad about traveling to Antwerp. She remembers a famous sex worker from Ghana who was adored by her customer. Then, in a church that Efe had introduced her to, she meets a man named Luc, who follows her around for a while. She eventually starts dating him, and he falls in love with her right away and wants to remove her from her life. Despite the possibility of Luc betraying her,

she chooses to accompany him after weighing the opportunity and everything else she has experienced.

She feels anxious about the choice.

We quickly cut to the three women talking about Madam's demanding demeanor in the wake of Sisi's passing. Luc answers the doorbell and inquires as to Sisi's whereabouts. As she gets to Luc's house, a flashback shows Sisi getting ready to flee. He hasn't arrived home yet. When the doorbell rings, it's Segun, the clumsy, stuttering man who lives with the four women in Madam's flat. In the car, he wants to speak with her. She's not scared of him, but she's not sure what he wants from her. She enters into the car. He quickly strikes her skull with a hammer to kill her. We learn that Dele orchestrated her demise.

### The West and the Rest

The west has planted the idea that they are the founders of civilization, it begins and ends with them. This story has its deep influence on the rest of the world. Many believed that the west is the paradise of humanity. The west imagined themselves to be the kings, emperors and leaders of the world and forced the other camp (the east) to believe and submit to their pretention of superiority through colonialism.

The idea is obvious in the novel being discussed. The four African characters believed that the west is just the opposite of their own country and therefore rush for. Dele (who convinced the four to travel to Belgium) emphasized the idea that has already seeded in four characters' minds and portrayed the west as the salvation:

" Belgium. A country wey dey Europe. Next door to London. '...he made it sound as if you could walk from Belgium to London. From one door to the next...if I want go abroad, Oga Dele? Anybody dey ask pikin if de pikin want sweet....' ...Who did not want to go abroad? People were born with the ambition, and people died trying to fulfil that ambition.... [8:70]

The quote tells much. The postcolonial world, generally, is convinced that the west has created the modern world. The idea has been planted in the post colonized psyche. African imagine that the west is a different and separate entity. Efe thinks that going abroad is her chance to achieve her dreams including assuring good life and education to her son :

"... I am going abroad... 'The word abroad' brought a smile that stretched her lips from one end to the other and a sweet taste to her tongue, a taste not unlike that of very ripe plantain . . . . I am going to Europe. Belgium .... 'Before Rita had a chance to ask her how and where, Efe preempted her and said close to London'. She repeated Dele's phrase, seeing in her mind's eye two big doors one beside the other...." [8:71-2].

Efe also said that " he says a woman can earn easy money there... before one year even, I'll be rich, I'll buy Mercedes Benz!" [8:72]. Her mind portrayed to her that the west is the center of wealth and all kinds of advances. Now, she is a dreamer of getting easy money within almost no time; unlike her own country in which she is nothing as one of the songs illustrated:

"Lagos na no man's land,  
Lagos na waya.

For Lagos, man pikin no get sister or brother.

For Lagos, na orphan Ibe.

Lagos na waya aaa". [8:117]

Therefore the four women wanted to leave Lagos to get rid of misery. For them Africa is backward.

Ama confirms that she is just like many wants to leave and says that she knows many people who want to travel abroad at any cost even to give a part of their bodies if need be [8:140]. When she arrived Belgium, all her dreams shattered finding that it is just a lie.

Sisi had a university degree but could not earn a job in her own country. Dele offered to fulfill her dreams and earn money to provide her family, build a big house and get a car. She decided to accept to gain better life and opportunity. Being there, she found out that there is no good job for her in Europe. She starts to wear short skirts, dresses with open chest and takes alcohol. Slowly, her dreams vanish and lead to self destruction. Sisi starts to forget her past being a good, respectful and loved person. In Belgium she had to work in a job she does not want to work in to earn money to live. She is now enslaver in her new identity, a slave to her boss both in soul and body.

Alek's (Joyce) boyfriend abandoned her because his family refused her and want him to marry from his own clan. He thought that the best way to make her forget about him is to travel; so he helped her as a compensation. Her boyfriend also thought that Europe is a place of wealth and she will be happy with such substitution.

The society of Africa is patriarchy. The norms are more important than human being's feelings or fate. Colonialism further entrenched patriarchal norms by aligning with and amplifying existing male-dominated structure. Colonial authorities often codified customary laws that favored male authority, diminishing women's traditional roles and rights. The effect is obvious when we see that the four women in the story are being exploited by the men of their own country and race.

After being deceit, Alek travelled to Belgium. Instead of the promised job of Dele and the boyfriend she ends up with different direction leading her absolutely to a nightmare not her pink dreams.

Efe, again, suffered from the same patriarchal society when she was abandoned by the father of her son. She thought that Titus, the father, will never abandon her because she brought him a male child which was valuable in African society. She was shocked that he left behind with his son. The dreamer now replaced her old dream to make a family to another one, that to travel for better life for her and her child.

The four leave their homeland out of ignorance, misleading, war, harsh patriarchal society and decadent socio-economic conditions. Being in Belgium, the four women are seen as strange and different what made them desired by white people. After realizing their new situations; the dreams now changed. They have to work for money to live. They lost their souls and bodies by working in prostitution; slaves again with different means.

Changing names was part of trying to wash their souls to enable them live with the new identities that they never new. It indicated their attempt to slough off their past, culture, identity and the most important their souls that are already polluted at home.



Alek's name is changed to be Joyce which meaning is far different from reality:

"the name has to go. Alek. Sound too much like Alex. Man's name. We no wan' men. *Oti oo*. Give am woman name. Fine name for fine gal like her ...

see... Cecilia? Nicole? Joyce? ... Joyce. Yes. Joyce. Dat one sound like name wey dey always jolly. Joyce!" [8:230].

The name is chosen by Dele (the man who arranged the coming of the four women). By changing her name she erases her old personality and family history since she was called Alek after her grandmother's name; wearing another one to fit the new word she is living in. On the flight from home to Belgium Alek felt like "cargo with a tag"[8:233]. Using the word Targo highly symbolize that she feels like a slave (an item to sell). This is one of the narrator big reference to the Africans' enslavement in the west in twenty-first century:

"They would all have numbers, for names were not important. Their names would be chosen by whoever bought them. Names that would be easy for white clients to pronounce. Easy enough to slide off their tongues" [8:278]. Selling and Renaming by the new owners is one mean of slave trade in the past; history repeats itself with new shiny cover.

Chisom changed her name to be Sisi also to wear a new identity for her new life. She supposed that the name is strange but familiar [8:279]. Chisom tried to adapt to the new condition and thought that she can; but her first experience with a Belgium man (client) reveals a lot:

*"This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in my bed. This is not me. This is not me. This is somebody else. ...* And she baptized herself into it with tears, hot and livid, down her cheeks, salty in her mouth, feeling intense pain..."[8:212-13].

Obviously, she was trying to deny herself and separate her mental state and physical situation (the soul and body) but in vain. She could never complete her dreams and plans to be rich and reback chisom again. When she wanted to free herself from slavery, she was murdered. Her plan was to flee with her Belgium boyfriend but Dele found out and killed her with a hammer. None of the three could know her real name or her past or any relatives to send her body. If we want to analyze the real reason of Sisi's adventure and immigration we will find out that it is the false assumption of the wealthy life in the west and the allusion of becoming rich in Europe. Being enchanted with such inherited ideas she decided to fly to the new world. Among the three, Sisi did not suffer from any trauma in the past. She wanted to prove herself and live luxurious life that she could not earn at home with her university degree. Sisi was desperate out of miserable economic conditions which was enough to lead her towards such decision. After being a captive to her thoughts, many wrong choices and discovering the bitter truth of her work; she feels like a toy. When she desired to change her situation and restore her soul and body, she was killed just like a fugitive slave in the past.

Sisi, the character whom tragical story is the motive and motif that runs the plot, and the other three characters were actually enslaved physically and mentally in the same new world (the West) that colonized Africa in the past ruined countries and people; promising to defend freedom and fight racism in the present.

## Conclusion

On Black Sisters' Street is a novel that reveals how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence the Africa women shaping their migration journeys and experiences of exploitation. The novel highlights how colonial histories of economic extraction and cultural domination have left African countries grappling with systemic poverty, political instability, and limited opportunities for their citizens. These conditions serve as push factors for the protagonists' decisions to migrate in search of better life, only to encounter new forms of exploitation abroad.

In the postcolonial context, the novel underscores the persistence of racial hierarchies, neo-colonial economic dependencies, and the commodification of African bodies in Western societies. The women experiences of sex work in Europe reflect the global inequalities rooted in colonial histories, when African bodies continue to be dehumanized and exploited.

On Black Sister's Street critiques both colonial systems that created the socio-economic precarity in Africa and the postcolonial global order perpetuates these inequalities. It calls for a deeper examination of the intersection of race, gender, and global capitalism, emphasizing the need to dismantle these lingering colonial structures to achieve true liberation and equality.

## CONFLICT OF IN TERESTS

**There are no conflicts of interest**

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